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Some Of My Favorite Poems Are Trash: A review of Rod Smith's Touché

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A Review of Rod Smith's Touché

Rod Smith is that rare American poet who is better than the movies. If we extend this analogy a bit, we might liken Smith's work to that of the great character actors of modern cinema: performers like Bob Hoskins, Jean Arthur, and Ned Beatty, whose sheer command of persona elevated many good films to greatness, and on a number of occasions prevented mediocre films from being simply awful. The character actor neither proselytizes nor apologizes but simply occupies the space with a resolute density, his presence more factual than phenomenal.

Like a good character actor, Rod Smith has shown the capacity to be many things: a poet, bookseller, teacher, and small press impresario. His diverse undertakings subscribe to the broadest possible definition of *poetic work*, and he treats each of these activities as potential sites of communal engagement. Rather than simply viewing the reading public as potential consumers, Smith makes clear his commitment to the decidedly less glamorous aspects of literary culture. At their best, activities like publishing, editing, and teaching inform poetic practice as much as they enable it. They double as points of resistance, as independent editors and writing collectives offer counterexamples to systems of publishing and authority that are increasingly corporatist in their orientation. Without free agents such as Smith, much of the best poetry would be consigned to oblivion by the very structures that profess to support it.

Smith's newest volume, *Touché* (Wave Books, 2015), demonstrates the tension between the world and the written word. Like many of his past books, *Touché* adopts a lyrical persona that ultimately refuses the conventions and imperatives of the mode. Rather than function as conduits of wisdom or precious objects of sympathy, Smith's narrators more closely resemble the long lineage of trickster figures, whose insights and comedic critiques are among the oldest and most revered in the cultural landscape.

Take this passage, from the poem "Buoyancy":

> Everything I have written is trash. I have not
> even the strength to love. Let it go.
> That's true that is not true. Untrained
> tandem gnat-brain if you want the city
> and dying fish to be a touchstone rub
> the indicator needle & a genie will
> appear, knitting. I'm sorry for saying
> I loved you when I've not really done
> that. But o I have in my foolish batter
> head, in my back, too tight, the frog
> voice underneath.

Here we see Smith's narrator exchange the cloying melody of the lyric for such stark, unequivocal statements as "everything I have written is trash." We hear in this phrase the historical echoes of others, chief among them Antonin Artaud's polemical assertion that "all writing is pigshit." However, Smith takes Artaud's statement a step further by naming the lyrical "I" as the originator of this unproductive trash. His narrator adopts the first-person pronoun to demolish the very persona at the heart of the lyrical enterprise, an act that constitutes a far more salient critique than Spicer's wistful "no one listens to poetry," an oft-quoted passage that blames the tools (but not the carpenter) for the shortcomings of language.

Even as Smith mercilessly skewers the self-absorption that characterizes American lyricism, he reveals his affection for the very culture that he critiques. This contradiction is implicit in Smith's refusal to euphemize: his writing, when it fails, is neither flotsam nor jetsam; it is not rubbish, garbage, or detritus. It is *trash*—and trash, as we can all agree, is a distinctly American kind of pigshit.

Smith treats American culture like the hometown that it is: a place that attracts and repels like no other. One might even say that Smith is homesick for American culture even as he lives in it. When he writes in "The Good House etc." that "it takes great courage / to visit certain homes," we see the obvious metaphor of the house, which in this case is hardly a metaphor at all: it is representative of the larger edifice of American culture, that same unwieldy vessel that both permits and problematizes Smith's body of work.

Like many poets, Smith uses humor to engage with the world around him. One can tell a lot about a writer by how he laughs, and Smith's humor is far from the softly ironic exercises in self-deprecation that one often sees in contemporary verse. Much to the contrary, Smith's weap-

onized humor is the original smart bomb, the crooked smile a mugger makes in the moments before he separates a passerby from her purse. This smiling verse does not want to invite the reader to tea—instead, it tells the story of his or her complicity in the making of the American landfill.

> This elitist crap does not one any good.
> I'm damn tired of reading posts by musical elitist punks
> who think.
> I've never understood this elitist crap
> It's very confusing trying to figure out what an elitist is
> these days
> crap about elitism flourishes.
> elitist crap. It's too bad
> but this 'elitist' crap
> promotes the exact elitist crap you espouse

In the passage above, from "Elitist Crap Bag," Smith parodies a common argument against avant-garde art—the notion that difficult or nonlinear modes are by their nature exclusive and impenetrable, unable to be correctly appreciated without a certain kind of insider knowledge that functions as a key to unlocking meaning. Smith's passage mobilizes a traditionally "low" form of art (parody) to challenge the idea that art reliant on universalism and essentialism is more worthy of reading than its denser counterparts. But Smith's passage is not simply precursor to a laugh track. It is an opportunity for reflection, a moment of comic defamiliarization that occurs as the reader encounters the one line uttered without a hint of irony: "It's very confusing trying to figure out what an elitist is these days."

Nowadays, it may be easier to say what an elitist is not. An elitist would never participate in a conversation whose narrative he could not control. But Smith's work has a knack for staying out of its own way, and in this regard, Smith has much in common with John Ashbery, who once claimed a propensity for "erect[ing]…a smokescreen near the end of [his] poems so [he] can withdraw unperceived." He said, "I never like to be around for the last line."

Smith, however, does not merely absent himself from the poem but arranges his work (and the arguments it contains) so that it yields to the reader. The point of poetry, as Oren Izenberg has written, is less to put readers in dialogue with an author than it is to place readers in conversation with one another. With that in mind, one might think of

Smith's poems as a series of signposts; that is, they direct the reader to a place without telling her what will be found there.

Upon reading the final line of *Touché*, one might better understand that any poetic community is formed through acts of reading, which demonstrates affinity and empathy and makes readers vulnerable to those who would converse with them. Most members of these communities are not even aware that they are members, which makes codification of those conversations impossible. Smith provides a lesson in social cohesion in an age when physical proximity (not to mention textual engagement) is becoming increasingly anachronistic. If poetry is still capable of achieving this end, then no doubt it is, as Smith writes, "truly remarkable trash."